

# Obama's Failed Middle East Policy

By [Avni Dogru](#)

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Only in 15 months after his historical Cairo speech, there are alarming signs that President Obama's new engagement policy with the Middle East may soon find its place in history's dustbin. The Obama administration's withdrawal announcement of U.S. "combat" troops from Iraq by the end of August is nothing more than a PR campaign to rename the occupation. Similarly, the newly announced direct peace talks between the Netanyahu government and the Palestinian Authority doesn't seem more than a tactical move for political gains in the current conjuncture, aimed to secure the Jewish vote in the mid-term elections in November and to ease Netanyahu government's unprecedented isolation before the international community. To make matters worse, the beating war drums in the region between Israel and both Hezbollah and Iran raise fears that the region may plunge into a larger scale chaos, which would mean a disaster for all actors involved, including the United States.

## Turkish Turnabout

Barack Obama's election victory inspired unprecedented hope around the world but especially to the people of the Middle East, where eight years of George W. Bush's unilateral policies virtually destroyed the U.S. reputation. When he decided to make his first overseas trip to Turkey in April 2009, Turks embraced Obama. During his trip, an opinion poll conducted by Infakto Polling Company showed that 52 percent of Turks trusted Obama, a huge improvement compared to their [two percent confidence](#) in President George W. Bush in 2008. This low confidence in President Bush in Turkey in 2008, the lowest in the world, was mainly a direct result of two factors. The two U.S wars in the region, but especially the Iraq war that had a devastating effect on the Turkish economy and undermined Turkey's security by transforming northern Iraq into a sanctuary for Kurdish separatists. Second, the continued push for an Armenian Genocide resolution in the U.S. Congress. For Turks, judging another nation's history one-sidedly for political reasons in a foreign parliament was an open hostile act.

The Turkish public hoped that Obama's strong message of change would translate into a significant change in the U.S. Middle East policy. But, this hasn't been the case.

Iraq remains unstable and we are still far from the end of the war. Despite the media hype about the withdrawal of the U.S. "combat" troops, this move doesn't signify the end of combat mission in Iraq. There are still remaining 50,000 U.S troops in 94 U.S. bases with significant combat abilities and moreover, private contractors will simply be taking over the responsibilities of the withdrawn U.S troops. In other words, this is nothing more than

[renaming the occupation](#) for political purposes. It is not hard to see the symbolic nature of this withdrawal just by looking at the size of the U.S. bases and diplomatic facilities and the huge number of private contractors in Iraq. In terms of security, July was the deadliest month for civilians for more than two years and the political stalemate still continues, even more than five months after the March elections, with no hopes of any solution in the near future. What is even more worrisome for Turkey is the increase in PKK's deadly attacks in Turkish soil, with the current political chaos and the lack of federal authority in Iraq.

On the Afghanistan front, the war doesn't seem to end in the near future either and, on the contrary, has had signs of spreading into Pakistan, further destabilizing the region. The Obama administration's decision to send more troops to Afghanistan was another important factor that questioned Obama's credibility in the region.

Meanwhile, the Armenian Genocide resolution, which passed the House Foreign Relations committee in March 2010, created an uproar among the Turkish public. As a consequence, the Turkish confidence in Obama [dropped](#) to 23 percent in May 2010, down more than half from only a year before.

In June 2010, Obama administration attempted to water down the UN Security Council condemnation of Israel's deadly assault on the Turkish humanitarian aid ship in international waters of the Mediterranean. Vice President Joe Biden, meanwhile, offered unconditional U.S. support for Israel after the flotilla incident. This deadly attack and its aftermath had two important consequences. It put Turkey right at the center of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and inevitably further tarnished the U.S. image in Turkey. Consequently, if the current UN Panel of inquiry put together by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon fails to come up with tangible results such as an Israeli apology and compensation, which seems unlikely, [a break in Israeli-Turkish relations](#) and further deterioration in the U.S.-Turkish relations should come as no surprise.

## **In the Arab World**

The situation hasn't been any different in the Obama administration's relations with the Arab Middle East. The blurry picture both in Iraq and Afghanistan raises the fears that the U.S. will not leave the region any time soon. In addition, the U.S. military attacks in Yemen and Pakistan, and Obama's failure to build bridges with Syria further tarnished his image in the region. In his attempt to restore ties with Syria, the U.S. demand about distancing itself from Iran and Hezbollah in return was viewed illusory by many. And Obama's renewal of the economic sanctions, first imposed by Bush in 2004, for another year ended the hopes for U.S.-Syrian rapprochement, before they matured.

On the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, rated [the most important factor](#) in the Arab public's disappointment with the Obama policies according to a recent Arab opinion poll, Obama's failure to pressure the Netanyahu government into stopping new Jewish settlements in occupied territories, lifting the Gaza blockade, and starting peace talks with Palestinians played an important role in the dramatic decline in the hopes for Obama administration's Middle East policy. Only 16 percent of the Arab respondents said they were hopeful in 2010, down from 51 percent a year ago, according to the survey. In addition, Israel's humiliation of Joe Biden by announcing 1,600 new housing units during his visit to Israel in March 2010 – and the Obama administration's limited reaction — have strengthened the common view in the region that the U.S. has lost its influence in the region. Moreover, Obama's efforts to kiss

and make up with Netanyahu during the July 6th summit in Washington did little to raise the peacemaking profile of the administration among Arabs. After all this, the newly announced direct peace talks is not seen anything more than a political maneuver in the current conjuncture and does not excite anyone in the region.

As a result, Arabs in the Middle East have increasingly come to the same conclusion. Obama has good intentions, but he is unable to make any changes in U.S. policies and has to defer to Congress and the Washington lobbies. Accordingly, 38 percent of the people surveyed in the same Arab opinion poll said that “they have favorable views of Obama, but don’t think the American system will allow him to have a successful foreign policy.” Obama is not simply handcuffed by dynamics in the region. He must also face the financial reality that pro-Israeli sentiments play a major role in the Democratic Party and among party contributors. In a political system, where as much as [40 percent](#) of all contributions to Democratic candidates are donated by Jewish Americans, any pressure by the Obama administration on the Netanyahu government before November doesn’t seem very likely.

There are also legitimate fears that the region may plunge into a larger scale chaos. In a recently released [Contingency Planning Memorandum](#) from the Council on Foreign Relations, retired U.S. Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer argues that a third Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah is imminent. According to the report’s scenarios, Israel might attack Hezbollah or lure it into a war. Or it might use a conflict with Hezbollah as a cover for an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. If Israel attacks Hezbollah or Iran, or in the case of a joint U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran, the conflict is likely to spread throughout the region and have irreversibly devastating effects.

### **Obama as Last Hope?**

During the Bush era, Muslims thought it was the neoconservatives that shaped U.S. foreign policy that created all the disasters in the Middle East. Obama’s name represented hope for a change in U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East that no other American presidential candidate could have delivered. If Obama could have changed the current trajectory and shifted from hard to soft power, the American image could have been revived in the region.

If Obama doesn’t reverse course, the region will lose one of its last hope for diplomacy. After the possible elimination of Turkey as a peace-maker in the region, as a result of severed Israeli-Turkish relations, diplomacy will become increasingly dysfunctional. Radicalism will grow, and as a consequence military responses will become even more popular.

As hope in Obama fades, support for Iran increased significantly over the last year. Among the Arabs surveyed in the Zogby/University of Maryland poll, 77 percent now supported Iran’s right to its nuclear program, compared to 53 percent one year ago. And 57 percent said Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons will be more positive for the Middle East, up from 29 percent last year – a huge increase that says a lot about the loss of hopes for diplomacy in the region.

Clearly, the only way to restore peace in the Middle East is by avoiding military confrontations and restoring diplomacy. Therefore, the U.S. should first end its occupation both in Afghanistan and Iraq, instead of attempts to rebrand and continue them under a new name. On the diplomacy front, the Obama administration should offer a bigger carrot and engage with Syria and Iran with genuine intentions, and, at the same time, drop its short-sighted domestic political worries and pressure the Netanyahu government not to ignite any

new military confrontations in the region, and to avert the approaching break in Israeli-Turkish relations. An active peace-maker Turkey, with leverage on Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and Syria, can achieve things in the region that the Obama administration can't. But only the Obama administration can achieve something that Turkey cannot: Deterring Israel from sparking new conflicts in the region.

*Avni Dogru is a political analyst and a freelance writer based in New York. He can be reached at [editorus@gmail.com](mailto:editorus@gmail.com).*

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